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Out of the Echo Chambers and into the Public Sphere: A Habermasian Social Epistemological Critique

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Abstract

The tendency to be more excluding on account of views and beliefs held has intensified all the more. The proliferation of discussions and forums through social media reflects both the potential and challenges of the Internet as a public sphere. While these platforms foster widespread and immediate engagement, the rise of echo chambers, characterized by selective information sharing and trust disparities, undermines inclusivity and genuine public discourse. This paper examines the tension between echo chambers and the Internet's potential as a public sphere, where individuals can engage in meaningful and rational discussions, specifically those involving relevant socio-political deliberations. Grounded in Jürgen Habermas's framework, the paper explores the Internet as a communal space that fosters open dialogue, contrasting it with the exclusionary dynamics of echo chambers. By analyzing the essential features of echo chambers within the context of the 2022 Philippine National Elections, the paper situates this phenomenon in the broader socio-epistemological landscape. It demonstrates how the Internet embodies the characteristics of a public sphere while addressing its challenges. Ultimately, this paper argues that echo chambers are antithetical to the democratic nature of the Internet, emphasizing the need for digital spaces that promote inclusive and critical engagement.

On Bubbles and Chambers

Good news: It can be observed that discussions and forums of every kind have recently proliferated everywhere, prevalently on the Internet and specifically through social media. Bad news: The tendency to be more excluding on account of views and beliefs held has intensified all the more. This premise takes into account how much of what people give credence to is obtained online, and how this same has become saturated with false information.¹ The rapidly worsening phenomenon of 'fake news' now magnified by the advancement of AI technologies that create misleading accounts contributes to the divisiveness already present in social media. For instance, to engage in a social media post with which one can agree is to bring about tides of posts presenting others similar to it, if only to keep one attentive to the task of social media surfing.²

In any case, these interconnected phenomena lead to the reconsideration of what C. Thi Nguyen refers to as *epistemic bubbles* and *echo chambers*; interrelated yet distinct in terms of how they began and how they operate.³ By nature both are social since they concern the members

¹ See Keith Raymond Harris. 2022. "Real Fakes: The Epistemology of Online Misinformation," *Philosophy and Technology* 35 (83). <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13347-022-00581-9>.

² See Diego Saez-Trumper, Carlos Castillo, and Mounia Lalmas. 2013. "Social Media News Communities: Gatekeeping, Coverage, and Statement Bias." *Proceedings of the 22nd ACM International Conference on Information & Knowledge Management*. Referenced in C. Thi Nguyen. 2020. "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles." *Episteme* 17 (2): 141–161, 141. Hereafter, I refer to "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles" as "ECEB".

³ See "ECEB," 141.

of society and, at the same time, epistemic, since they have something to do with how these same members cling to beliefs that form part of their noetic structure. While Nguyen's main intent is to distinguish them and demonstrate echo chambers as more epistemically and socially deplorable, one cannot but notice how they are more or less similarly situated within the landscape of various sources of information—the media in general, and specifically the internet and its social media networks.⁴ Simply put, to deal with either epistemic bubbles or echo chambers or both is to fundamentally come to terms with the means and circumstances of communication, discussion, and knowledge propagation. In a special way and as already mentioned, their locus is predominantly the Internet with all its trappings and intricacies, but a more fundamental realm provides the initial circumstance wherein these phenomena can take place.⁵

By this we mean the *public sphere* which generally encompasses the social life of all citizens and where an opinion can become a matter of discussion at the communal level.⁶ Conceptually, the notion of the 'public sphere' captures what it means to voice opinions, share information, and create conversations, and while it presumably involves every individual citizen, it remains free from the constraints and control of politics.⁷ Technically and historically, however, it only pertains to a specific situation in eighteenth-century history wherein it first came into existence alongside the distinction between 'opinion' and '*opinion publique*,'⁸ which then describes "the universal reason of the generality of thinking individuals continuously engaged in open discussion."⁹ More contemporary scholars have taken the liberty to appropriate the idea of the 'public sphere' in relation to the Internet which is now seen as its most important encompassing manifestation.¹⁰ In these narratives, the internet is

⁴ See "ECEB," 142.

⁵ Habermas describes these phenomena in a similar way, although the description befits *echo chambers* more: "A mode of semi-public, fragmented and self-enclosed communication seems to be spreading among exclusive users of social media that is distorting their perception of the political public sphere as such" (See Jürgen Habermas. 2023. "Reflections and Conjectures on a New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," in *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, trans. Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge: Polity Press. Adobe Digital Editions).

⁶ See Jürgen Habermas. 1974. "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article." Translated by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique* 3, 49. This article presents an accessible summary of Habermas's important (and dense) but complex work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of the Bourgeois Society* wherein the idea, history, development of the 'public sphere' and its notion are all firstly articulated and analyzed.

⁷ See Habermas, "The Public Sphere," 49.

⁸ See Habermas, "The Public Sphere," 50.

⁹ Keith Michael Baker. 1992. "Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 183.

¹⁰ See Zizi Papacharissi. 2002. "The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere." *New Media & Society* 4 (1): 9-27; Terje Rasmussen. 2014. "The Internet and the Political Public Sphere." *Sociology Compass* 8 (12): 1315-1329; Adrian Rauchfleisch and Marco Kovic. 2016. "The Internet and Generalized Functions of the Public Sphere: Transformative Potentials from a Comparative Perspective." *Social Media + Society*, 1-15. Situating these attempts to utilize Habermasian thought, Habermas's commentators have engaged in debates on whether the idea of the 'public sphere' is exclusive to that particular European historical context, or something that can be abstracted from it to highlight "the universal aspects of that 'conception of the public sphere' (e.g., its rationality, equality, openness, democracy that Habermas clearly sees as relevant or a critique of our own

seen as an avenue for almost uninhibited communication, discussion, and sharing of information, which then sets the stage for possibilities of socio-political participation.

This paper proposes an interpretation of the public sphere that responds to the problem of echo chambers on the internet. Firstly, I situate echo chambers within the Internet, specifically in social media, by demonstrating the presence of its essential elements using a specific situation: the 2022 Philippine National Elections. I then highlight characteristics that make the Internet identifiable with the public sphere. To interpret the Internet as a public sphere in this way suggests that the very nature of echo chambers is antithetical to the former as its predominant medium in today's social epistemological landscape.

Echo Chambers on the Internet

Nguyen's exposition primarily relies on insights from the empirical analysis of Jamieson and Cappella, so much of the contexts that she narrates are demonstrative of Western contexts, specifically the mainstream media.¹¹ Discussions on various public opinion matters are determined by what television networks choose to show and present to the public. This creates a specific disparity between those who are used to watching one network and those who have no particular preference at all. Consider the apparent divide that separates the patrons of Channel 2 ABS-CBN News and that of Channel 7 GMA News. Certain brandings can be associated by supporters with the network they patronize, and implicit in this is the connection that they make between the manner of news reporting and the perspective that they get to receive and eventually accept concerning their beliefs about current events.

If in mainstream media, this partisanship is already apparent, imagine how magnified this phenomenon becomes when situated within the context of limitless information accumulation paired with the establishment of seamless online connections. Following Jamieson and Capella, what Nguyen articulates in relation to existing echo chambers is evident all the more within the range of the internet that now encompasses and even surpasses the scope of mainstream media. From the previously expensive and laborious processes of accessing and disseminating information and points of view through the media, from newspapers to radio and television broadcasts, the internet opened a more effective and accessible space for anyone who has the means for it.¹² Not only is this access easy and immediate, it is also wide-ranging and varied to the point of being overwhelming. Compared

societies)." If one leans toward an interpretation of Habermas within more recent discussions such as the aforementioned, then it makes sense to side more with the latter opinion, i.e., that the 'public sphere' is not uniquely attributable to a European historical period but is rather a notion that extends to social circumstances where it can be applied, regardless of the milieu (See Lloyd Kramer. 1992 "Habermas, History, and Critical Theory." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 250–251).

¹¹ See "ECEB", 146.

¹² See Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao. 2016. "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80: 298–299.

to the other forms of media, the Internet provides an unprecedented assortment of information on almost anything.¹³

Faced with this opportunity to rummage through all available information, it becomes important to ponder what people look for when accessing the internet. What kind of information do people look for on the Internet? What kind of information are people keen on putting on the Internet? Among myriads of possible answers, two possibilities stand out. More commonly assumed, on the one hand, is that people go to the Internet to acquaint themselves with a wide range of information that corresponds to the inquiries that they raise in their daily routine.¹⁴ From recipes to explore to important local news and relevant global trends, the Internet serves for many the purpose of satiating the desire to know more. On the other hand, despite the availability of plentiful options, people can decide to go to the Internet to either confirm what they already believe in or just enjoy specific content that they deliberately identify and separate from others.¹⁵

At first glance, there is nothing problematic in either account since both manifest the simple intent to obtain information from sources other than one's own. What is alarming is when people become so engrossed by the information they come across online to the point of being intolerant of views that do not cohere with what they consider acceptable. The fact that this is a commonplace reality is accounted for by studies on people's tendency to "select like-minded news based on source cues... [like] cues about the scant of the content itself or its relevance to their interests."¹⁶ Exacerbated by algorithms that depend on what one frequently chooses to search, check, and engage, the people's chance to see more and select information to digest apart from what they can already confirm and agree with becomes more limited.¹⁷ This Internet mechanism works best in social media, as can be attested to *prima facie* by its users.

The increase in the number of content similar to what they choose to engage with reduces content diversity in favor of what is already preferred.¹⁸ Theorists of psychology refer to this phenomenon as 'confirmation bias,' and casual, routinary scrolling in social media will tell for oneself the degree of this observation's factuality.¹⁹ Once one has had sufficient grounding for what has been 'confirmed,' the next step is to disseminate this stance to other people who are more likely to agree with the opinionated belief.²⁰ The matter of accepting what has been shared may rely on the affirmation of what one agrees with, but this

¹³ See R. Kelly Garrett. 2009. "Echo Chambers Online? Politically Motivated Selective Exposure Among Internet News Users." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14, 265.

¹⁴ See Flaxman, Goel, Rao, "Filter Bubbles," 299.

¹⁵ See Flaxman, Goel, Rao, "Filter Bubbles," 299.

¹⁶ Andrew Guess et al. 2018. *Avoiding the Echo Chamber About Echo Chambers: Why selective exposure to like-minded political news is less prevalent than you think* (Miami: Knight Foundation, 6.

¹⁷ See Matteo Cinelli et al. 2021. "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 118 (9), 1.

¹⁸ See Cinelli, "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," 1.

¹⁹ See Matteo Cinelli, et al. 2020. "Echo Chambers on Social Media: A Comparative Analysis." *arXiv preprint, arXiv:2004.09603*.

²⁰ See Cinelli, "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," 2.

acceptance may also depend on internal motivations. Among such motivations, for instance, are political beliefs that inform what they intend to read, watch, or simply give attention to on social media.²¹

If this is the case, it is not surprising that partisanship, as mentioned above, are among the immediate upshots of selective and preferential social media dissemination. The conglomeration of opinions cohering with one another leads to the reinforcement of the same opinions within a group, eventually moving toward the creation of a polarized perception that defines the direction of the group's subsequent opinions.²² At this point, the most obvious essential element of an echo chamber stands out: the gathering of opinions for credence within a group corresponds to the “core set of beliefs” that enlists one to be part of the said group.²³ The other two can be implied, although a concrete demonstration will be more effective in presenting them: firstly, the “*disparity in trust between members and non-members,*” and; secondly, the exclusion and discrediting of non-members alongside the amplification of the members' epistemic credentials.²⁴

The Social Media Echo Chambers during the 2022 Philippine National Elections

Some researchers are keen to suggest that political participation in the Philippines, especially among young people, is “anchored on political socialization in offline and online spaces.”²⁵ This means that beyond traditional means that required physical conventions that often risked safety and well-being, young people utilized online platforms, especially social media to advance their political opinions and social commentaries.²⁶ The voicing out of these sentiments online has become the subject of a study that presents young people's ‘behavioral patterns’ in social media engagement.²⁷ The study revealed that interactions and information dissemination have been concentrated mostly into “eight significant communities” that are ‘tightly-knit.’²⁸ The study is inconclusive on whether these online communities are exclusively tied to specific keywords that hint at their possible political preference, but it does present us with the common words that arise from the online public conversations of these communities. Some of these words can be highlighted to suggest group preference: “never again,” “Marcos,” “Leni,” “martial law,” and “troll,” among others.²⁹

Not much analysis can be poured over these words alone, yet anyone who has been familiar with how the election discussions online went can immediately affirm that they are loaded

²¹ See Garrett, “Echo Chambers Online?”, 266.

²² See Cinelli, “Echo Chambers on Social Media,” 2.

²³ “ECEB”, 146.

²⁴ “ECEB”, 146.

²⁵ Charles Erize P. Ladia and Rogelio Alicor L. Panao. 2023. “Filipino Youth in Viral and Virulent Times: Unpacking the Predictors of Youth Political Participation in the 2022 Philippine Elections,” *Child & Youth Services*, 7.

²⁶ See Ladia and Panao, “Filipino Youth,” 5.

²⁷ Christine B. Tenorio, Yammie P. Daud, and Lalevie C. Lubos. 2023. “Viral Voices: Exploring Twitter as a Platform for Public Engagement in the 2022 Philippine Election,” *Jurnal Studi Pemerintahan* 14 (3), 319.

²⁸ Tenorio, Daud, Lubos, “Viral Voices,” 322.

²⁹ See Tenorio, Daud, Lubos, “Viral Voices,” 321.

with meanings that align with a party's interests. For example, "Marcos" and "Leni" refer to the two most popular presidential candidates, so it is not presumptuous to claim that they designate two opposing parties online. The other terms like "martial law" and "never again" are interrelated and are also associable with either of the candidate parties, whether the terms be agreed with or opposed. The term "troll" has been thrown around so much by both parties in order to discredit the opposing narrative in favor of one's own, thus intensifying the already existing polarization.³⁰ They are not explicitly given, but the elements of 'exclusion' and 'discrediting' are evident in this situational demonstration.

The online users' choice to only express and share opinions and views that correspond to their party's ideals is already suggestive of the distrust for other narratives and the bolstering of the narrative believed, which then indicates one's epistemic credentials.³¹ Likewise, the willingness to tag as "trolls" those with whose views they disagree, seeing them as belonging to a party that must be repudiated, is also an indication of the tendency to discredit which is present in echo chambers.

The Internet as a Public Sphere

Two things are now clear: firstly, that the Internet facilitates access to and dissemination of all kinds of information and opinions, and secondly, that within the Internet exist echo chambers that patronize selective and exclusive online communication and information sharing in favor of their members and to the discredit of non-members. The concern that remains to be addressed is whether the existence of echo chambers concords with the nature of the Internet itself; simply put, if echo chambers should exist on the Internet. To propose this inquiry as a matter of debate, a defined interpretation of the Internet must be presented. One such interpretation sees the Internet as a public sphere, and as mentioned previously, attempts to do so have already been made. Discounting the interpretation of the 'public sphere' that limits it to 18th century England, it is obvious that the idea of the public sphere which precisely involves information and opinion dissemination suggests its presence on the internet. A more important claim must be taken into account: the public sphere is not merely a constituent of the Internet but is its essential characteristic insofar as communication and discussion of information are concerned.³²

³⁰ See Aries A. Arugay and Justin Keith A. Baquisal. 2022. "Mobilized and Polarized: Social Media and Disinformation Narratives in the 2022 Philippine Elections." *Pacific Affairs* 95 (3): 549–573.

³¹ See Kiran Garimella et al. 2018. "Political Discourse on Social Media: Echo Chambers, Gatekeepers, and the Price of Bipartisanship," *Web and Society*, 913.

³² I interpret Habermas to be alluding to this same thought in this descriptive narrative quoted here:

The internet opens up virtual spaces in which users can empower themselves as authors in a new way. Social media create freely accessible public spaces that invite all users to make interventions which are not checked by anyone—and which, as it happens, have also long since enticed politicians to exert direct personalized influence on the voting public. This plebiscitary 'public sphere', which has been stripped down to 'like' and 'dislike' clicks, rests on a technical and economic infrastructure. But in these freely accessible media spaces, all users who are, as it were, released from the need to satisfy the entry requirements of the editorial public sphere and, from their point of view, have been freed from 'censorship', can

What makes the Internet a public sphere, then? What characteristics inherent in the public sphere are essential to it? The repetition of ‘opinion dissemination’ as one of the main activities within the Internet is a telltale sign of its necessity to the latter, but even Habermas acknowledges the difficulty of circumscribing the Internet’s impact on it, specifically of social media.³³ What makes this complicated is that much of the exchanges that take place on the Internet are due to the “commercial exploitation of the currently virtually unregulated Internet communication.”³⁴ This means that given an extrinsic motivation that is different from the fundamental intentions of expressing and communicating, like the bolstering of social media traffic, the activity simply becomes a facade for ulterior motives. Perhaps there is more behind opinion dissemination, something more profound, that transforms the Internet into a public sphere.

One approach is to distinguish between the senses of the Internet as both a ‘public space’ and a ‘public sphere.’ Concerning the former, the Internet is a medium for discussions of any kind.³⁵ In this sense, the kinds of information that can be shared and the means to share them, even if they tend to be authoritative and restrictive, are not given much attention. This means that the choice of being excluding is also available aside from the default situation that normally allows discourses. When it comes to the latter, the Internet becomes an avenue for discussions that promote a “democratic exchange of ideas and opinions” more than anything else.³⁶

It is not enough, then, for the Internet to be just conducive for opinion and information exchange and dissemination. More than this, it requires the democratic quality that ignores divisions among the participants within the public sphere, on the Internet and social media, and turns them into “potential participants in numerous public interactions and debates.”³⁷ Therefore, for the Internet to be democratic is for it to facilitate the proliferation of democratic expressions; anyone can share perspectives and everybody can be part of socio-political discourses.³⁸ To be ‘democratic’ in this regard is to form and share opinions within “an open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal social and substantive boundaries,” in a manner independent of decision-making bodies, like

in principle address an anonymous public and solicit its approval. These spaces seem to acquire a peculiar anonymous intimacy: according to hitherto valid standards, they can be understood neither as public nor as private, but most readily as a sphere of communication that had previously been reserved for private correspondence but has now been inflated into a new and intimate kind of public sphere (See Habermas, “Reflections and Conjectures”).

³³ See Jürgen Habermas. 2022. “Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 39 (4), 161.

³⁴ Habermas, “Reflections and Conjectures.”

³⁵ See Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere,” 11.

³⁶ See Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere,” 11.

³⁷ See Rasmussen, “Internet and the Political Public Sphere,” 1316.

³⁸ See Rasmussen, “Internet and the Political Public Sphere,” 1316.

the government.³⁹ All these considered, the Internet is a public sphere, simply put, if it has an inclusive character conducive to the formation, exchange, and dissemination of opinions.⁴⁰

The Public Sphere as the Antithesis of Echo Chambers

Based on what we have so far, implicit interrelated concepts arise in relation to the idea of the Internet as a public sphere: democracy and inclusivity. The question remains on whether echo chambers should be on the Internet which is a public sphere, and a potential answer to this comes from contrasting the essential traits of an echo chamber with the aforementioned characteristics of the Internet as a public sphere. Recall that Nguyen's propositional description of an echo chamber is that it "creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members,"⁴¹ and that this 'disparity in trust' is exemplified in the ways demonstrated in the 2022 National Election situation: discrediting non-members and excluding them on account of difference and non-adherence to certain opinions and beliefs. A counter-proposition could be stated in this form: *By virtue of the Internet's being a public sphere, an epistemic community that centralizes discrediting and exclusion based on opinions and beliefs held exists antithetically within a space that promotes democracy in expression and inclusivity.*

Habermas's question can serve as an initial guide that tests whether an online community can appropriately find its place on the Internet:

Our question is rather whether, through the changed mode of use, these [social media] platforms also prompt a kind of exchange about implicitly or explicitly political views that could influence the *perception of the political public sphere as such*.⁴²

It seems at first that the question could be read in a way that particularizes discussions limited to politics, but once one realizes that echo chambers are created for political-related reasons, as demonstrated, then the question becomes an appropriate retort to the continuous proliferation of echo chambers on the Internet. Since it is outright exclusion that the public sphere repels, echo chambers may then present themselves as excluding as a form of self-defense from contrary opinions and beliefs that they consider to be detrimental. Nguyen refers to this as "*disagreement-reinforcement mechanism*," and it could be easily utilized to mask the dismissive tendencies of echo chambers behind the pretension of disagreeing with a claim deemed false, even without the instrumentation of argumentative discourse.⁴³ It is even possible for such echo chambers to present themselves as public spheres, if only to merit their capacity to 'defend' their beliefs.

³⁹ Jürgen Habermas. 1997. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Translated by William Rehg. Cambridge: Polity Press, 307. See also Rasmussen, "Internet and the Political Public Sphere," 1318.

⁴⁰ See Habermas, "Reflections and Hypotheses," 167–168.

⁴¹ "ECEB", 146.

⁴² Habermas, "Reflections and Hypotheses," 164.

⁴³ "ECEB", 147.

Against this, it can be opined through Habermas that even if these communities be given the designation ‘public sphere’ or at least ‘semi-public sphere’ due to their obvious limitations, their perspectives would still be affronts to the legitimate democratic public sphere which prizes over all “an inclusive space for a possible discursive clarification of competing claims to truth and a general equal consideration of interests.”⁴⁴ Therefore, let it be the case that for as long as inclusion is not a trait that can be associated with a community that has a claim for the preferability of particular beliefs and opinions, even without the opportunity to justify and defend such a claim in the face of opposing purviews, then it should not be constituting the spaces of the Internet as a public sphere. This, precisely, is what makes echo chambers antithetical to the very locus within which they operate, and vice versa.

Recapitulation

This attempt to discuss echo chambers within the context of the Internet as a public sphere reveals some points of contradiction between their essential characteristics, namely, exclusion and democratic inclusion. Due to their selective information dissemination, priority for the similarly held opinions and beliefs to the discredit and exclusion of virtually every other opinion, echo chambers stand in stark contrast to the inclusive and democratic nature of the Internet which is particularly seen as a public sphere. The 2022 Philippine National Elections serve as a pertinent example, where the prioritization of partisan narratives and the labeling of dissenting views as “trolls” underscore the exclusionary nature of echo chambers, contrary to the public sphere's nature of inclusivity and discourse.

Habermas puts it succinctly:

Insofar as this leads to the formation of self-supporting echo chambers, these bubbles...differ from the fundamentally inclusive character of the public sphere...through their rejection of dissonant and the inclusion of consonant voices into their own limited, identity-preserving horizon of supposed, yet professionally unfiltered, ‘knowledge.’⁴⁵

Therefore, while the Internet facilitates almost unlimited access to information, and allows diverse perspectives to prosper and intermingle, its potential as a public sphere stems from its capacity to go beyond echo chambers. This is true for as long as it holds on to principles of democratic exchange where all voices are heard and discoursed rationally, and where threats of exclusion and discrediting are addressed.

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